

## School choice supporters celebrate education options in Arizona

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By Michelle Reese, Tribune

Across the country, more states are planting paths for school choice - from a charter school law in Maine to a sweeping voucher program in Indiana to the voucher-like empowerment scholarship accounts in Arizona.

Those choices were in the forefront of a celebration Friday at Gilbert's Edu-Prize School, one of Arizona's first charter schools to launch when the state adopted the law more than 15 years ago.

There are 41 states, plus Washington, D.C., that allow charter schools - privately run public schools funded by taxpayers. More than 2 million students attend them this year. In Arizona, that number is around 135,000 - close to 13 percent of the state's public school students.

Choices abound in this state. Arizona allows parents to home-school, with 35,000 students learning at home. Thousands of K-12 students receive tax-credit scholarships to attend private schools. Students can choose to attend their neighborhood public school, or they can apply to enroll in a school down the street or across town through open enrollment laws.

"All children should have the right to go to a school of their choice and receive an excellent education," Barbara Duncan, assistant principal at Edu-Prize, told the students and about 100 guests at the event.

All these options were highlighted Friday. The ROTC color guard was from Gilbert Unified School District's Highland High School. Homeschoolers Andy Izard, 17; Austin Lee, 16; and Jenna and Leah McCarthy, ages 10 and 7, delivered the Pledge of Allegiance. Edu-Prize charter students stood and listed their "character counts" pillars.

And speakers, including state treasurer Doug Ducey and former Intel CEO and chairman of the AZ Ready Education Council Craig Barrett, talked about why choice is key to changing education in the United States.



Michelle Reese

### **Celebrating school choice**

Students at EduPrize in Gilbert take part in a celebration of School Choice Week Friday. Homeschool, district, charter and private school students and families, as well as state and city lawmakers and education leaders were all in attendance.

"It's about the kids. It's about empowering parents to pick the best places for their kids," said Liz Dreckman, president of Arizona School Choice Trust, an organization that awards scholarships to students from private, corporate and tax-credit donations.

During the outdoor celebration, Barrett engaged the children of Edu-Prize, who were all sitting on the school's field.

He told them the two most important things they can receive and hold onto are their education and their personal integrity.

"When you have those two things, the rest is easy. You have the opportunity to be successful," he said.

Barrett is president and chairman of the board for BASIS Schools, a nationally recognized charter operator with schools in Arizona, including Chandler and Scottsdale. He pointed to Edu-Prize, as well as BASIS and Great Hearts, as models of positive charter schools.

"Edu-Prize is a demonstration of what can be done and can be accomplished. We want to see more of it throughout Arizona and the U.S. That's why we're proponents of school choice," Barrett said.

The event ended with a balloon launch at 10 a.m. that was to coincide with other launches at schools of choice across the state.

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